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## I LOVE YOU, BEN

ERIN GOUDREAU

Jennifer looks around her living room. A metal staircase spirals at an almost vertical angle, only slightly more homey than simply installing an escalator. Gray, sparsely padded couches that look almost as uncomfortable as they feel line two of the walls. In the center of the room sits a low coffee table, its corners capable of wounding even the most careful of guests. Minimalist art hangs on the wall, abstract shapes, everything gray and black with hints of brown.

“God, modern architecture is a downer,” she says to the baby in her arms, his mouth sucking greedily at her breast. He doesn’t seem to hear her.

A book on French history and another on fish-based recipes sit on the coffee table. Jennifer flips through one of them absentmindedly while the baby sucks. She puts the book down and rubs the scar on her left wrist. She considers the fact that neither one of them had ever been to France. They don’t care much about history, and they don’t cook.

“Fuck!” cries Jennifer as the baby breaks the skin on her left breast. Pinpricks of blood form above her nipple. She rests her head on the back of the couch and tells herself that it was an accident, of course it was an accident. The baby seems startled by the noise, but immediately resumes sucking.

When he is done he looks at her contentedly, satisfied. Jennifer stares back, and waits, as though she will feel some sort of motherly instinct if only she is patient enough. She stands him up on her lap and lightly pats his back. As he begins burping, Jennifer closes her eyes and lets out a labored sigh.

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The room is gray and white, cinderblock walls and metal chairs and tables. Not all that different from Jennifer’s house.

“Do you know who I am?”

This seems like a simple question, but Jennifer knows it's not. It asks: do you know how fucked up what you did is? Do you know how crazy people think you are? Do you know what the consequences are going to be?

"You're a psychiatrist," Jennifer says. "Which I think means you're paid to ask me how I feel and why I feel that way. Or are you the one allowed to give me the drugs that make it so I don't feel anything?"

The doctor looks down at his notepad, a small smile on his face.

"Did anyone explain why I'm here? Why you're speaking with me?" he asks.

"Yes. They said I am being examined. I assume they mean mentally."

"Well, I don't know if I would phrase it like that. I'd say that I'm just here to have a conversation with you."

"Sure. A conversation in a police station," Jennifer says. The doctor settles into his seat. Like he knows he's here for the long haul.

"You're right. I guess it's a little more than a conversation. I just don't want you to feel like there are any right or wrong answers here."

This is maybe the stupidest thing Jennifer has ever heard. Of course there are right and wrong answers.

"Uh huh."

The doctor smiles again.

"Why don't we start by talking about the woman on Ryman Street?"

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Jennifer puts a Nina Simone album on, trying to drown out her son's screaming. The few minutes of calm that always come after he breastfeeds have passed. She bounces him up and down on her waist. She paces the floor, circling rooms and climbing the stairs, anything to keep moving. For a moment, Jennifer allows herself to think about what her day will look like tomorrow. This is a deadly exercise. This is when she is reminded that tomorrow will look exactly like today. And yesterday. She and her husband will talk past each other as he gets ready for work, and as bad as it is when he is home, it will be worse the minute he's gone. Then it'll be just her and the baby. Those are their names in her head: the husband and the baby.

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"This woman was a stranger to you, correct?"

"She wasn't a stranger. I knew her. I mean, I didn't know her

know her, but I knew enough.”

The doctor is nodding and taking notes. “What do you mean, enough?” he asks.

“I mean, I watched her. I could tell she was responsible and kind. I trusted her.”

The doctor stops writing and looks up. “How could you tell all of that?” he asks.

“From the way she talked to her mailman. Also from how much effort she put into the wreath and the lights on her house.”

“You actually thought that was sufficient?” the doctor asks, though not unkindly. “You thought you knew this woman’s character based on her house’s curb appeal?” Jennifer gives a small nod.

“Were you aware of how cold it was that night?”

“Fahrenheit or Celsius?”

“Jennifer,” the doctor says. The kindness in his voice is gone.

“I knew it was cold, below freezing. I didn’t know the exact temperature.”

“Was that something you thought about at all? Worried about?”

“No, I wasn’t worried. I mean, at the time, it didn’t really occur to me.”

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Jennifer holds her breath as she lowers the baby into his crib, asleep after two rounds of Nina Simone and another two of Joni Mitchell. Her arms are tight as she pulls them out from under his back, prepared for his eyes to snap back open at any moment. She backs away slowly, tiptoeing out of his room, shuts the door softly and leans against the wall. She closes her eyes to keep from crying.

Back in the kitchen, Jennifer holds a small ice pack to her breast. She sets aside three small, green capsules she has saved for lunch, piles cold sesame chicken on a plate and pours herself a glass of wine. She eats the chicken methodically. She rubs her scar and thinks about the friends whose calls she hasn’t returned in weeks. After her plate is cleared, rinsed, and in the dishwasher, she swallows the Prozac and drains the wine glass.

Jennifer is pretty sure she doesn’t love her son. She doesn’t exactly have anything to compare it to, other than the way her mother felt about her. But she’s pretty sure. Usually this doesn’t bother her too much. On the days that it does, she’s got the little green capsules.

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“Okay, Jennifer. I’d like to go about this a different way.”

"Whatever you say, chief."

The doctor rolls his eyes at this. "What were you hoping to accomplish?" he asks.

Jennifer can't decide if what the doctor asked was profoundly dumb or exactly the right question.

"Well, I was trying to get rid of the problem. Or, at least, what I saw as the problem. I guess."

"Why didn't you wait until your husband had come home before you left?"

"I did wait for him to come home. I waited as long as I could."

•

Standing in the kitchen, Jennifer pours herself a second glass of wine. She thinks about her husband. She thinks about how he is going to come home from work, and at no point in the evening will he ask her any questions. He won't ask how her day went, or how the baby was, or whether she needs a break tonight. He will eat dinner and watch the Mets game. He will tell her about his day. And then, before heading up to their bedroom, he will go into the baby's room. He will not walk slowly, and he will not tiptoe. He will stroll up to the crib and look at the baby the way Jennifer has been trying to look at him for a month. He will give the baby a look of love, and it will be easy for him. He will not see the baby as a burden. He will see the baby as perfect, a reflection of himself. The ultimate display of narcissism. He will bend down and kiss the baby on the forehead, and when he comes out of his room, he will look sincerely sad to have left.

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"When did you decide to stop waiting for your husband to come home?"

"It was after midnight. I'd say maybe two or three."

"What did you think he was doing?" The doctor pauses. "Was this a way to get back at him?"

There is something in his voice that isn't committed to this idea, this line of questioning.

"You know Doctor Scott, I can't even begin to guess what my husband was doing," Jennifer begins, her volume climbing with every word, "or why he didn't call to tell me what he was doing. But that's why I didn't leave my baby at the house. I needed to leave. I couldn't wait any longer, so I took him with me."

"Okay, Jennifer, but when you decided to leave, with your son,

did you have any reservations?" the doctor asks.

Jennifer continues. "I know what I did was wrong. I understand that. I don't need your patronizing moral outrage. I am aware that what I did is hard for people to understand, although maybe I should exclude you here. I get the sense that you understand exactly what I did. Would you agree that this sort of thing seems to poke a hole in the stories we tell ourselves? The stories that say that single people are lonely and married people are happy? The one that says all mothers love their children?"

"I don't know, do you?" the doctor responds. He's abandoned the notes now, his whole body resting in his chair as he listens to her.

"Do I what?"

"Do you think that what you did subverts some larger story we tell ourselves?"

"I know I don't love my child. But there's nothing particularly notable about that."

•

Jennifer has nursed the baby again and put him in his crib, and now she is back at the kitchen counter. She has made a decision. She has decided that when her husband comes home she is going to tell him she needs to leave. Maybe even tonight. She is going to tell him that she tried, she really did, but she doesn't love him. No, not him, the baby. But maybe not her husband either. She tried though. She really did. But now she needs to stop trying so hard or she's going to lose it. Really, she's going to lose it.

Pacing back and forth between the fridge and the counter, Jennifer decides to have another glass of wine and a few more green pills. She takes them to the couch that feels like sitting on cinderblocks, and after she's sufficiently dazed she allows herself to think. This isn't something Jennifer permits often, because she can only ever seem to think about her mom, the accident, her scar, or the fact that she doesn't love her son. Jennifer thinks about the time when she was seven and she told her mom she wanted to be a beautiful princess-lawyer. She would defend the innocent by day and live in her castle at night. She thinks there was a prince involved. She remembers her mom's neck tightening and back becoming rigid as she turned to face Jennifer. Jennifer thinks about how her mom's eyes hardened as she told her that you can be beautiful *or* smart, and then asked her, simply and without emotion, if she knew which one she was.

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"Jennifer, I want to ask about your childhood if that's okay."

It seems to Jennifer that the doctor has filled at least half his notebook. She wonders what his analysis would be at this point.

"Sure. I mean, I don't really know what that has to do with what happened," Jennifer says.

"I understand. But I'd like to talk about it anyway if you don't mind."

"Yeah. Okay."

"Can you tell me about your parents?"

"Sure. I mean, my dad was great. Soft around the middle, scruffy beard, and silly. He was a kid's dream. He used to lie on the ground on his back and read me books while I sat on his stomach."

"Have you talked to him recently?"

"He died when I was thirteen."

The doctor looks down at his notepad for a moment. "I'm so sorry," he says, looking up at her. "What about your mother?"

"I don't know, I mean, we weren't close. But so what? A lot of kids aren't close with their parents," Jennifer replies.

"Come on, I think you can give me more than that."

"I'm not sure what to say. I guess she was the opposite of my dad in just about every way. She was very harsh. She had my sister and me on diets by the time we were in middle school. Even as a kid, I definitely sensed that she wasn't happy with the way her life had turned out. I don't really think she ever wanted us. I would say most of what I learned about self-doubt, self-loathing—that kind of thing, I got from her."

The doctor leans back in his seat. His eyes seem to be almost dancing. "Do you think your relationship with her has influenced the way you relate to others? Perhaps to your son?"

"I really don't know Doctor Scott. Does that sound good to you? Will it look good when you write that in your notebook? Then sure."

The doctor smiles knowingly at Jennifer.

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It is two in the morning. Jennifer has been sitting on her cinderblock couch, thinking for hours, but she is done thinking about her mother. Now she is thinking about leaving tonight, even if her husband doesn't come home. She is thinking about that woman who lives alone in that big house on Ryman Street. Young woman, in her thirties. She's thinking that maybe that woman would like to try not living alone anymore. Jennifer's not doing anything wrong. She's just thinking. She's just putting on her coat and taking the baby out of his crib.

She's not doing anything really. She's just swallowing another

green pill and walking outside with the baby in her arms. She's just buckling him in his car seat and driving to that woman's house on Ryman Street. The one who lives alone. She's just going to stop in and say hello. Maybe she'll let the woman have the baby for the night. She's hardly doing anything really.

•

"You said you don't love your son. How do you feel about that?"

"I mean, not great," Jennifer says, releasing a hollow laugh. "But it also seems to me that there are a whole lot of liars in this world pretending to love certain people in their lives, simply because it is expected of them. I would go so far as to say that the love that is instinctual as opposed to prescribed, pure as opposed to tainted with the grime of expectation, is the exception, not the rule. But there is nothing scarier than being a witness to someone relinquishing those expectations."

"And was that what you were doing? Were you relinquishing expectations?"

Jennifer looks down at her hands in her lap. "Yeah, I guess so. I just couldn't do it anymore."

Jennifer looks up at the doctor. He has set down his pen and is resting his chin on his right hand. Jennifer vaguely registers that she has begun to cry.

"Jennifer, are you fully aware of what you did?"

"I just, I didn't know what would happen, it didn't happen like it was supposed to, and I know you don't believe me, but this wasn't what was supposed to happen. She was supposed to be home, and I didn't know it was that cold, and I didn't know he was going to be sitting on her porch for that long. It wasn't what I thought would..." Jennifer trails off, looking at the doctor pleadingly, waiting for him to finish her sentence or change the subject.

They look at each other for a moment, saying nothing. The doctor sighs as he returns to his notepad, and reads aloud:

"Jennifer, at 2:30 yesterday morning, you, while high on Prozac, drove your son Ben to a woman's house. She was not home. You set him, wearing nothing but his pajamas, on the porch. It was fifteen degrees Fahrenheit. He was hypothermic within minutes, and by the time the woman got home, Ben was dead."

Jennifer doesn't know what to say. She says nothing.

"I'd like to ask you something," the doctor says.

"I don't think I have anything else to say," Jennifer says. "I don't think I could..."



"Can you talk to me about the scar on your wrist?"

"What?"

"On your wrist. The one you've been rubbing the whole time we've been talking."

"It's nothing. It's from a car accident I was in when I was nine."

"What happened?"

"I mean, it was just a car accident. My sister and I were in the back, our mom was driving. She lost control of the car and we swerved into oncoming traffic. It was a head-on collision and we were all pretty badly hurt. The scar is from a rod they had to put in my wrist, since the bone was too shattered to repair."

Jennifer is lying. She knows this. The doctor knows too. He wouldn't be asking about it if he didn't know what really happened.

"I mean, she was drunk," Jennifer says slowly, "which was uncommon for her, and she had taken a bunch of pills. Also the road wasn't busy, conditions were fine." Jennifer is barely audible now, her whole body shaking uncontrollably.

"Like I said, I knew she wasn't that fond of my sister and me, or the particular circumstance our existence forced her into." Jennifer looks at the doctor. "My mom has always denied it of course. But I don't think I've ever felt as sure that it was true as I did when I was writing the letter. In that moment, I could feel it. I know she tried to kill herself and us in that car."

"Jennifer, in your letter you say that you don't love your son. And it sounds like you don't think your mother loved you."

"Yeah, I'd say that's right."

"Did you love your mother?"

"Of course. That's why it hurt so much. Her indifference, I mean."

"Did you always love her?"

"Yes, for as long as I can remember."

"Jennifer, did you ever think that maybe Ben felt the same way?"

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Jennifer is sitting alone in an interrogation room in a police station. A doctor has just left the station. On the table in front of her is a piece of white printer paper. She is writing on it—the same thing, over and over again. *I love you, Ben. I love you, Ben. I love you, Ben.* •